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Refereed Paper # 4

Framing Messages of Democracy through Social Media:

Public Diplomacy 2.0, Gender, and the Middle East and North Africa

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Keywords
Arab Spring Uprisings 2011-; Democracy; Egypt; Foreign Policy; Gender; Social Media; Tunisia; Women, Public Diplomacy

Abstract

This study examines how U.S. public diplomacy directed toward the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and public diplomacy from the MENA to other regions, including the U.S., uses social media. It analyzes how messages regarding recent events in the MENA are constructed for Western audiences, how public diplomacy rises from this construction, and the resulting the benefits and challenges within intercultural communication practice. Utilizing a framework for social media flow the processes of gatekeeping are examined, from both state and non-state actors representing MENA voices, and western actors who receive those voices, to illustrate public diplomacy from the MENA is a “glocal” construct of the traditions of both of those localities. To investigate social media flow we draw upon extensive field research in Tunisia and engage in discourse analysis to analyze online spaces created specifically for political engagement and agency, and for challenging hegemonic norms and political oppressions. The study highlights considerations such as women’s contributions to the recent MENA events as well as discourses concerning MENA women’s ‘advancement’, to illuminate the need for a culture-centric public diplomacy that moves beyond the essentializing tendencies of western discourses.

Introduction

Public diplomacy, or “efforts by nations to win support and a favorable image among the general public of other countries, usually by way of news management and carefully planned initiatives designed to foster positive impressions” (McQuail, 2010, p. 568), is of increasing interest to both scholarly and policy-making arenas. Perhaps nowhere have public diplomacy efforts of the U.S., U.K., and other European governments have received more interest than in the Middle East and North Africa (see, for instance, Agence France Press, 2008; Djerejian, 2003; DuPont, 2010b; Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Hayden, 2011; Kraidy, 2008; Nisbet, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2004; Sevin, Kimball & Khalil, 2011; Shinar & Bratic, 2010; Zaharna, 2009).

And no particular area of public diplomacy has received more attention of late than what is increasingly known as “public diplomacy 2.0” (see, for instance, Glassman, 2008; Graffy, 2008; Graffy, 2009; Morozov, 2009; van Noort, 2011). Also known as “digital diplomacy” (British Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2010; DuPont, 2010a; Lichtenstein, 2009), “digital public diplomacy” (Cull, 2011), “e-diplomacy” (see Rajasalu, 2011), public diplomacy 2.0 uses social media and other Web 2.0 tools to engage with targeted audiences, and promises increased interactivity, cost-effective reach, and opportunities for more equitable information flow.

This study examines how U.S. public diplomacy directed toward the Middle East and North Africa, and public diplomacy from the MENA to other regions, including the United States, uses social media. In particular, we investigate how messages regarding the recent events in the MENA are constructed for Western audiences, how public diplomacy rises from this construction, and the resulting the benefits and challenges within intercultural communication practice.

Drawing from the current research literature on internet-delivered and social media-centered public diplomacy (see, for instance, Ciolek, 2010; Copeland, 2009; DuPont, 2010; Fisher, 2010a; Fisher, 2010b; Grant, 2005; Khatib, Dutton & Thelwall, 2011; Graffy, 2009; Morozov, 2009), critical/cultural studies scholarship in public diplomacy (Dutta-Bergman, 2006), and more populist discussions of public diplomacy 2.0 (see, for instance, *Economist*, 2010; Lichtenstein, 2011), this study analyzes the benefits and challenges of this type of diplomatic communication, particularly in the scope of the U.S. – MENA public diplomacy efforts as an enactment of dialogic engagement which has been critiqued as an aim to “leverage social media and related technologies to persuade skeptical audiences to empathize with American policies” (Comor & Bean, 2012, p. 203). To investigate this process, the digital reflexivity (Newsom & Lengel, forthcoming) of Arab Spring messages are interrogated as products of both public diplomacy and social media.

Utilizing a framework for social media message flow (Newsom & Lengel, forthcoming; Newsom, Lengel, & Cassara, 2011; the processes of gatekeeping are examined, from both state and non-state actors representing MENA voices, and western actors who receive those voices, to illustrate public diplomacy from the MENA is a “glocal” construct of the traditions of both of those localities.

Current social media outreach initiatives

The impact of social media on public diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and between the MENA and the United States has been tremendous. Initiatives such as the U.S. Department of State’s Office of Global Communications (Amr, 2004; Dutta-Bergman, 2006), Hillary Rodham Clinton’s Civil Society 2.0 initiative (Clinton, 2009; Dowd, 2012; U.S. Department of State, 2009), and the Digital Outreach Team (DOT) have been formed to enhance direct communication, or “engagement” as it is increasingly called by State officials (Comor & Bean, 2012), with citizens in the Middle East and North Africa through social media such as blogging, Facebook, Youtube, Flickr, and Twitter accounts (Khatib, Dutton & Thelwall, 2011). USAID has established a public-private partnership with the Knight Foundation to implement a new Media Assistance utilizing Technological Advancements and Direct Online Response program (MATADOR), to train and providing ongoing support for civil society organizations in best practices for social media for their outreach and activist efforts (van Noort, 2011). The Middle East Partnership Initiative has funded pilot projects for social media and other internet and computer mediated initiatives to encourage the increased civic participation of MENA youth. The State Department incorporates 2.0 tools such as mobile phone applications, social media, and twitter to encourage people-to-people engagement to promote good governance and enhance civil society (Hodge, 2008; Kamen, 2008; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, 2011).

While efforts have been intense the benefits, some argue, are limited. For example, the messages of the citizens uprisings known as the “Arab Spring” that have reached the West are filtered through a number of gatekeeping processes and levels of mediation that alter the “organic” messages from people within the MENA into messages designed to imply Western values as a means of reaching out to Western empowerment (Newsom, Lengel, & Cassara, 2011). The resulting public diplomacy re-creates the traditional marginalization and essentialization of MENA citizens and ideals: speaking “for” the voices in the media while simultaneously and purportedly showcasing those same voices. This conflict must be more closely analyzed by policy-makers, diplomatic professionals, and researchers to better understand whether social media can, in fact, highlight organic voices and local knowledge in a way that reaches a global stage, without relegating those voices to the tradition of the disempowered masses who must speak in the master’s tongue to be heard. In addition, as various voices from the MENA reach out to the West with messages of democracy, “advancement” of women, peace-building, “Arab Spring”, and other discourses reflective and constitutive of Western ideals, perceptions in the West of what this process means for “*them”* and for “*us”* become compelling motivating factors in foreign policy and in communication media.

The need for research on the impact of Web 2.0 in regard to the potential for engagement and open dialogue is particularly strong in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). While there is a large body of research on this region in relation to MENA activism, there remains rather limited scholarly research concerning online efforts toward social change (Faris, 2008a; Faris, 2008b; Wheeler, 2009) and activisms through social media in the MENA (Jansen, 2010), although it is growing. In contrast, online social networks, most notably Facebook, have been widely cited in the popular and political presses as fueling the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt (Benn, 2011; China, 2011; Cook, 2011; Derbes, 2011; “Facebook Action”, 2011; Ghosh, Hauslohner, Abouzeid, Walt & Baker 2011; Giglio, 2011; Hauslohner, 2011; Kirkpatrick, El-Naggar & Goodman, 2011; Kirkpatrick, Sanger, Fahim, El-Naggar & Mazzetti, 2011; Ladhani, 2011; Marquand, 2011; Motadel, 2011; Preston, 2011, Ratnesar, 2011; Sabar, 2011; Shane, 2011; Suárez, 2011; Walker & Orttung, 2011).

Critiquing the “conversation” with the MENA

Interactivity and engagement have been primary goals of U.S. public diplomacy prior to the proliferation of social media in the MENA (Chavez & Hoewe, 2010; Colla & Toensing, 2003). For the past several years innovations in U.S. public diplomatic efforts in and to the MENA have moved from a more traditional one-way communication flow through print and broadcast media to a “more interactive model in which the government joins the conversation” (Khatib, Dutton & Thelwall, 2011, p. 3). Social media and other Web 2.0 developments have afforded opportunities for the engaged, conversational approach to public diplomacy.

While social media provides scope to transform diplomatic communicative practices that feature engagement, immediacy, interactivity, and individualization, U.S. public diplomacy continues to receive critique for maintaining an inequitable information flow that has tended to marginalize and essentialize MENA citizens. It is the engagement goal of U.S. public diplomacy that has received the most harsh appraisal. In their recent article, America’s ‘engagement’ delusion: Critiquing a public diplomacy consensus, Edward Comor and Hamilton Bean (2012) interrogate the inherent contradictions in the current U.S. public diplomacy focus on engagement with the MENA, noting that “current consensus emerging around its deployment and potentials constitutes a dangerous delusion” (p. 206). Noting the efforts of public diplomacy leadership such as former Discovery Channel CEO Judith McHale, the form of engagement currently utilized is not an actual equitable exchange of ideas but rather “a strategic, targeted, and managed ‘dialogue’” (p. 208). They suggest that “a difficult but necessary reformation is now crucial – moving engagement away from its predominantly marketing and public relations orientations and towards, instead, a more ethically and democratically principled approach” (p. 206).

Gender and equitable dialogue

Can social media actually provide equitable communication channels to marginalized persons, or do they merely re-create gender, power, and political divides? Langlois, Elmer, McKelvey and Devereaux (2009) argue more research needs to be conducted to “further understand the networking of publics and their issues by considering how online platforms provide the material, communicational, and social means for a public to exist and therefore define the parameters for assembling issues and publics and circumscribe a horizon of political agency” (p. 415).

Khamis (2011) argues online social networks and other internet-driven communication spaces were important in enabling online activism leading up to and during the revolutions because they served as a “major trigger for street activism; encouraging civic engagement, by aiding the mobilization and organization of protests and other forms of political expression; and promoting a new form of citizen journalism, which provided a platform for ordinary citizens to express themselves” (p. 1163) (see, also, Milam & Avery, 2012). However, it is difficult to ascertain whether Web 2.0 spaces used to ignite and encourage the recent events across the MENA were actually transmitting organic, local messages or if they were used to transmit stylized messages meant specifically to reach Western audiences and garner Western support.

While the impact of social media has been positive in many arenas, not all women’s voices in the MENA are recognizably represented and disseminated on a global scale. In particular, the impact of the recent events across the MENA on enhancing gender equality has been questioned by feminist scholars and activists (Bibars, cited in Bohn & Lynch, 2011; Brown, 2011; Fathi, 2011, Nazra for Feminist Studies, 2011; Younis, 2011). Notable efforts for gender equality were largely contained to Tahrir Square in Cairo and to the various Tunisian and Egyptian cities where street protests occurred. Gender equality was also largely contained within online activist spaces, both limited to its local space and illimitable in its potential for discursively diffusing resistant ideals and goals.

Public diplomacy may also create metanarrative mythologies to reinforce the ideological and gendered stances of particular nation-states through storytelling practices. Take for example the following arguments from Kristin Hoganson (2005) in one of the few studies on gender and diplomatic relations:

> One of the greatest challenges I have encountered in teaching the history of U.S. foreign relations is convincing students that the history of the United States in the world is not just a story of presidential leadership and diplomatic dispatches—that it is also a story of grass roots activists, immigrants, missionaries, consumers, and countless other ordinary people. (p. 14)

It is the effort of activists and "ordinary" people in the MENA that have benefitted from the increased dialogue, engagement, and revival of citizen participation in public affairs afforded by social media. Such "ordinary" people as Mannoubia and Samia Bouazizi, the mother and sister, respectively, of Mohammed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid triggered the protests throughout the nation, emerged as important women leaders during the Tunisian citizen uprisings (Labidi, 2011). Online engagement, however, is defined by offline realities including, but certainly not limited to, the glass ceiling in public diplomacy (Snyder, 2009). Such "ordinary" people may still be regarded as consumers and users of the Web rather than producers of meaning in web-spaces. Thus public diplomacy may preclude autonomy on the part of "ordinary" people when public diplomacy messages are interpreted as an "imposition of norms, values, or institutions that do not fit the ways in which a given civil society would like to imagine itself" (Challand, 2008, p. 399). Elsewhere (Newsom, Lengel, & Cassara, 2011) we analyzed how the spread of universal women's rights discourse, based on the individual notion of rights, potentially ignores local women's communicative practices, marginalizing relevant knowledge and gains that have been achieved not only for women specifically, but also for broader civil society (see, also, Jad, 2008).

Such marginalization may have been case during the citizen uprisings in the MENA. Both online and in the streets, Nadia Marzouki (2011) commended the "impressive visibility of women" in the Tunisian demonstrations and how the recent acts are situated in contrast to "stereotypes about the 'Arab street' that propagate the image of a male-dominated public space" (p. 37). However, many scholars have commented on how women's roles in the events were "highly undervalued. Although women were important catalysts of the initial revolutionary phase, as events ran their course and gains were consolidated, these women activists were marginalized. Women continue to face enormous obstacles to entering the political arena in most countries that underwent the Arab Spring, notably Egypt" (UPF Office of Peace and Security Affairs, 2012, para. 8).

Silencing in the MENA

While Web 2.0 in the West encourages voices from multiple levels of society to speak out and voice a multitude of concerns and opinions, this does not hold true everywhere, including the MENA where the Web is a relatively elite space and is still highly regulated in many nations. As a mostly elite space, whether voices from all levels of MENA society were directly represented during the mediated conflicts of the recent events across the MENA must be investigated. Much of MENA political and cultural society has built in mechanisms for gate keeping and monitoring of information flow. How has public diplomacy 2.0 impacted this gate keeping and monitoring? Also, what was the impact of these systems of information control on how the messages of the Arab Spring were transmitted throughout the MENA and into the West?

A digitally reflective framework for social media message flow

In a region predicated upon cultural and sociopolitical differences between it and the West, the need for recognition of the local in the MENA is particularly strong (Newsom & Lengel, 2003; Newsom, Cassara & Lengel; 2011, Zaidi, 2003). The need for that recognition to be brought to the West is also imperative (Ayish, 2003; Bayat, 2010; Challand, 2008; Newsom & Lengel, 2003; Newsom, Cassara & Lengel; 2011). Ideally, this can be done through public diplomacy engagement. Challand (2008) points out that conventional wisdom in the West and coverage in Western media discusses a lack of democracy in the MENA, reinforcing notions that it is necessary for external—Western—actors to intervene. Thus, the democratization of MENA civil society becomes a step toward Westernization of MENA culture and cultural values, at least in Western perspectives.

Social media does, however, go through stages of mediation and contextualization, and these stages need to be recognized and understood. Computer mediated discourses delivered through social media refer to each other and cite themselves repeatedly, and users of digital media reinforce this process. The result is an intertextual and self-reflexive architecture which follows a narrative structure for message transmission (Jenkins, 2004). Social media, such as those utilized in the Arab Spring, also promote a native architectural style that is self-reflexive and self-referencing. Facebook’s shift to Timeline reflects the drive for narrative storytelling as an overarching structure. This resulting digital reflexivity illustrates how messages digitally transmitted through social media reflect greater metanarratives. For messages of the Arab Spring, the metanarrative of “democratic progress” as told for a Western audience, prevails. While stories emerge from organic sources within MENA local knowledge, the transmission of the story becomes part of this metanarrative of Western ideology.

More research is needed to examine what happens to the voice of a MENA citizen who witnesses a man set himself on fire in protest and tweets that to the world. How does that voice reach a wider audience and garner support for the issues specific to a single locality? How does a Big/western media conglomerate take that voice and frame it for its own needs?[1]

Patterns of message dissemination through public diplomacy, Big media and other actors must be analyzed to gain insight on many times the voice has been reprinted and restructured, and by whom. And we need to question whether the original voice is maintained through the process of transmission and retransmission through digitally reflexive media. Each time the voice is referenced and cited, is it inherently changed? Does each layer of citation add bias? Can MENA voices be translated for the West without altering the message and even the voice itself?

To study those messages travelling from MENA to the West and back again, we devised a Framework for Information Flow (Newsom, Lengel & Cassara; 2011). The Framework is designed to highlight the metanarratives which underlie the messages passing through localities via digital media. We ground this framework in an understanding of social media as a digitally reflexive form of communication (Newsom & Lengel, forthcoming), wherein the messages framed within social media are constantly open to re-creation and re-interpretation by various agencies. Social media act as narrative structures: users fit their messages into local narratives or functional media scripts, and then as the message reaches out toward a global stage other users reclaim that information and re-structure it to meet a larger, global metanarrative script.

Our original Framework follows a basic structure of the production and consumption of digitally reflexive messages from MENA to the West:

- Individuals speak out.
- Resistance leaders reframe individual voices to suit their needs.
- Resistance rhetoric is disseminated into the local area.
- MENA governments get hold of rhetoric, reframes to their needs.
- Reframed rhetoric is disseminated on a larger scale.
- West receives rhetoric and reframes it to suit itself.

This Framework examines the “organic” message as it travels through multiple levels of mediation to reach the West. However, the message does not stop after these six stages. Therefore, to further examine the process we expand the Framework to examine how the message continues into the next chapters of the metanarrative as a focus of Western public diplomacy:

- Reframed, Westernized rhetoric is disseminated through public policy.
- Western political structures reframe the rhetoric to their needs.
- Reframed rhetoric is disseminated as Westernized public policy.
- MENA political structures reframe and disseminate the Westernized public policy as their own.
- MENA resistance structures reframe and disseminate critiques of the public policy.
- Citizens in the MENA learn of the new public policy, reacting to it, resisting it, or accepting it.

Though this process we see how the local narratives from one region, the MENA, have been rewritten to fit the master narratives of Westernized Democracy and how American public diplomacy is thus structured to respond to the Westernized re-interpretation of the message, rather than aimed at the native, organic messages emerging from the MENA region.

Thus we can study the flow of public diplomatic discourses through digital and social media and examine the agents of power and knowledge construction at each level. We can see that local knowledge cannot be maintained in its organic form because of the constant process of reiteration through public diplomatic channels or civil society discourses (Newsom, Cassara & Lengel, 2011). Thus, the “glocal” knowledge produced and reproduced in social media is constructed by multiple agencies and power structures, each with their own biases and agendas at play, and open to constant manipulation.

Examining the multi-directional flow of public diplomacy discourses from the MENA to the West and back again, and even within the MENA itself, is important to analyze. Elsewhere (Newsom, Lengel, & Cassara, 2011; Newsom & Lengel, forthcoming) we analyze how such two-way dialogue is not static and changes through mediation and contexts. Utilizing the framework to reveal the impact of on public diplomacy from the West in response to these messages is the next necessary step in understanding the significance of the process. The immediacy of social media may, in fact, create a myth of accuracy in reception or interpretation. It also masks how, as discussed above, public diplomacy 2.0 efforts aim to be 'managed dialogue' (Comor & Bean, 2012) masked as actual equitable interaction.

Endnote

1) Berger, van der Plas, Huygens, Akrimi & Scheider (2008), in their work *Bridge the gap, or mind the gap? Culture in western-Arab relations,* argue for cultural diplomacy in MENA-western relations. They advocate "cultural security" and the "relevance of the arts" to maintain the balance of power". The authors argue, "Today the media, even more than transport mobility, play a growing role in interactions between societies and cultures. In this context, the large media conglomerates are persistently criticized by those in other cultures who see them as instruments for promoting Western values and establishing a profoundly unequal 'dialogue'" (p. 17).

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